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ABSTRACT

Cultural approaches to composition, such as those forwarded by John Trimbur, John Schilb, and James Berlin have come under strong criticism for attempting to indoctrinate students into instructors' political beliefs. One attack on writing as cultural criticism has been voiced by Maxine Hairston, who has questioned its ethicality. At issue in debates between critics and proponents of this approach are questions about the ways in which pedagogies are justified as right or wrong, good or bad. The two current approaches to composition designed to foster students' participation in public life through their understanding and use of writing can be termed "writing as cultural criticism" and "writing as civic thinking." James Berlin's expression of the cultural critical approach reflects features of a consequentialist form of ethical reasoning, whereas Sandra Stotsky's moral and civic thinking approach reflects features of a deontological form of ethical reasoning. Both consequentialist and deontological forms of ethical reasoning have benefits an problems when put into action. Consequentialist reasoning is open to the following criticisms: playing god, allowing agents no rest, violating personal integrity, enabling acts on the intuitive level that seem to be unjust. And although deontological forms of ethical reasoning equalize the obligations of all moral agents, they do not take into account the context of action and moral decisions. Teachers must examine the ways their composition theories fall into their traps of ethical reasoning. (Contains 15 references.) (SAM)

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Rhetorical Prudence and Ethics: Writing as Cultural Criticism vs. Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking

Introduction

Cultural critical approaches to composition, such as those forwarded by John Trimbur, John Schilb, and James Berlin have come under strong criticism for attempting to indoctrinate students into their instructor's political beliefs. These approaches to composition aim to enable students to critique ideologies implicit in cultural and discursive practices so that students will be able to resist and change unjust social, political, and economic conditions. One of the most noted and strident attacks of writing as cultural criticism has been voiced by Maxine Hairston, who has questioned its ethicality, contending that it "allow[s] a professor total freedom to indulge personal prejudices and avoid any responsibility to be fair" to their students (188). At issue in debates between critics and proponents of this approach are questions about the ways in which we justify our pedagogies as right or wrong, good or bad.

Further, concern for the ethics of our pedagogies has not been limited to cultural critical approaches. Expressivist pedagogies (Deletiner; Tompkins), which emphasize students' typically writing about private aspects of their lives withing emotional contexts and personal experiences, have also come under question for potentially intruding unjustifiably into students' personal lives, pehaps making writing teachers responsible in ways that they'd rather not, or shouldn't be (cf., Alton; Pfeiffer).

Emerging from these debates have been calls, such as that by Helen Rothschild Ewald, for an examination into the ethics of our composition theories. James Porter describes ethics as "principles of justification" and has argued that ethics and rhetoric are mutually imbricated in that ethics provides principles of justification for the "change[s]" writers or speakers bring about in their audience (224), yet ethics relies upon rhetoric to develop those justifications (cf., "Postmodern" and Audience and Rhetoric). While theorists such as Porter, as well as Lester Faigley and Carolyn Miller, are attempting to theorize postmodern ethics for composition, there has been no attempt that I am aware of to examine particular pedagogical theories for the forms and claims of ethical reasoning they rely upon to justify themselves as right or good.

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My presentation aims to contribute to such an effort by briefly examining two current approaches to composition that desire to foster students' participation in public life through their understanding and use of writing: these two approaches I will refer to as "writing as cultural criticism" and "writing as moral and civic thinking." Doing this, I believe, will help us as teachers in at least three ways: (1) it will help us to understand better strengths and limitations of the ethical implications of our pedagogical theories; (2) it will contribute to attempts to theorize about ethics in composition by identifying ethics already implicit in our theories; (3) it will contribute to our understanding of our positions and actions as teachers, particularly in our understanding of the ethical roles we posit for ourselves.

To begin this exploration, I examined specific articulations of each approach: the first one being that represented in "Postmodernism, Cultural Studies, and the Composition Classroom: Postmodern Theory in Practice" by James Berlin; the second one being that represented in two similar articles titled "Teaching Academic Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking" and "Conceptualizing Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking" by Sandra Stotsky. As I stated earlier, each approach aims to promote students' active participation in public life; however, they differ in their justifications and strategies for achieving this. Berlin's expression of a cultural critical approach reflects features of a consequentialist form of ethical reasoning, whereas Stotsky's moral and civic thinking approach reflects features of a deontological form of ethical reasoning.

In Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong, Louis Pojman identifies four features of a consequentialist form of ethical reasoning: (1) a definition of "good" in terms of a specific nonmoral condition or state, e.g., happiness, welfare, pleasure; (2) a belief that actions are not right or wrong in and of themselves but are so in terms of their effects or results (74-75); (3) a conviction that "we are not only responsible for the consequences of our actions, but we are also responsible for the consequences of our nonactions"; (4) a form of reasoning that involves an agent's determining from among a range of possible actions the one that minimizes the amount

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or degree of negative consequences and maximizes the amount or degree of positive ones (79). Pojman cites Bentham's utilitarianism as one example of consequentialism.

Writing as Cultural Criticism

The cultural critical approach to composition in Berlin's "Postmodernism" article reveals traces of this form of ethical justification. Basing this pedagogy on a social-epistemic conception of rhetoric, Berlin argues that composition courses should enable students to recognize writing not as being reflective of reality but constitutive of it. He asserts that students need to become aware that "signifying practices are not innocent," that they are imbricated in ideologies enabling and disabling particular social, economic, political and cultural conditions and our students' abilities as agents to act in given situations (22-23).

Thus, Berlin forwards a composition pedagogy that helps writing teachers "make students aware of cultural codes... [and to] encourage students to resist and negotiate these codes... in order to bring about more democratic and personally humane economic, social, and political arrangements. Students who learn how to do this become not only "genuinely competent writers and readers," Berlin contends, but also "will be motivated to begin the re-forming of subjectivities and social arrangements, a re-forming which is a normal part of democratic political arrangements" (27). Berlin argues that in bringing about these effects, this approach to composition instruction will do more to foster students' active and critical participation in public life than will approaches such as expressivism and current-traditional handbook methods (24-25). To promote students' critical consciousness in the writing course, he offers a three-pronged hermeneutic strategy, whereby students (1) identify binaries of key terms and their implicit hierarchical relationships, (2) situate these key terms and binaries within increasingingly widening circles of cultural narrative structures, and (3) apply these analyses to their own experiences in the form of written essays (28-31).

In its emphases on enabling resistance to ideologies that perpetuate inequities in order to bring about "the transformation and improvement of present social and political arrangements" (25), Berlin's cultural critical approach to composition articulated in Berlin's

article relies upon both the utility and the consequentialist principles implicit in consequentialist ethics. For this cultural critical approach relies upon a hope or belief that "recogniz[ing] and challeng[ing] dominant ideological formations" will bring about conditions in which the welfare of all citizens of a democracy is maximized and the potential for injustice is minimized. Further, this cultural critical approach relies upon a conviction in negative responsibility: writing teachers and students are as responsible for failing to examine cultural codes for their ideologies and as they are for promoting unfair cultural practices. For failing to do such an examination of cultural codes "make[s] them seem natural and timeless rather than historically situated social constructions" that could and should be changed (27).

Writing as Moral and Civic Thinking

In contrast to a consequentialist form of ethical reasoning, a writing as moral and civic thinking approach as articulated by Stotsky reveals a deontological form of reasoning. Pojman identifies four features of a deontological ethics as follows: (1) a premiss that actions are deemed good or right *of themselves*, not in relation to the *consequences* they result in; (2) a conviction that good actions should be considered obligations, which are determined by reason and can take the form of rules or imperatives; (3) a belief that good actions are universalizable across circumstances; (4) a form of reasoning that first determines what obligations a person has as a teacher, for example, or as a human, then applies those obligations to particular situations. Pojman cites Kant's categorical imperative as a common example of this form of ethical justification.

The approach to writing as moral and civic thinking explained in Stotsky's two articles reveal evidence of this ethical reasoning. This approach advocates that students need to recognize and understand their writing not as being ideological but as being an ethical and civic activity, as well as a cognitive or intellectual one. In these articles, Stotsky calls for a "moral theory of the writing process" that will enable us to teach our students how to include moral thinking in their writing by making them aware that as writers they have certain responsibilities. Quoting Israel Scheffler's work on education philosophy, Stotsky argues that

a moral and civic thinking approach to composition aims to instruct students in "principled deliberation...in which the basic condition holds that issues are resolved by reference to reasons themselves defined by principles purporting to be impartial and universal" (qtd. in "Academic" 161-162).

Incorporating this kind of thinking into our writing courses, Stotsky posits, will foster development of our students' moral character as citizens. In fact, she suggests that this approach will do more to help writing students in this regard than will cultural critical approaches to composition, such as the one I discussed, more traditional approaches to including moral thinking in pedagogy, e.g., discussing the moral significance of social events, because a moral and civic thinking approach teaches students to perform acts of principled deliberation in their writing tasks.

Stotsky suggests that composition students can be most effectively taught moral reasoning and their responsibilites as writers by learning the principles that underlie academic discourse. For, she asserts, these responsibilites are in fact those that characterize all writing that is deemed "responsible," because, Stotsky states that "ethical, or principled, thinking across a broad spectrum of moral concerns is fundamental to academic ways of knowing" ("Academic" 133; "Conceptualizing" 794). In particular, Stotsky urges us to teaching moral reasoning by instructing our students in obligations all academic writers have to their readers. This is because, in Stotsky's argument, academic writing is "the very instrument" through which "both independent and moral thinking... fundamental to both scholarship and citizenship" is expressed ("Academic" 130).

These obligations are neither discipline-specific nor dependent upon particular subject matters. Rather, Stotsky maintains, these are obligations that "the writer owes the readers independent of their [own] needs" ("Academic" 133), and these are "those academic principles that we independently apply to the research and writing we do on any topic" ("Conceptualizing" 797). Thus, Stotsky argues that this approach "suggests how moral virtue can be taught without indoctrinating students." Further, she suggests that it provides a

pedagogy to foster composition students' "intellectual and moral autonomy that underlies responsible civic participation and the determination of the common good in a representative form of self-government" ("Conceptualizing" 806).

In her articles, Stotsky identifies four categories of responsibility writers must fulfill in order to do "responsible writing." Each of these four categories relates to obligations an academic writer has in relation to different aspects of the rhetorical context of academic writing: a responsible academic writer must have "respect for the purposes of academic language," "respect for the integrity of other writers," "respect for the integrity of the subject" matter (i.e., topic), and "respect for the integrity of readers" ("Conceptualizing" page 799 has a useful list of these). Each of these principles has specific ways it can be fulfilled; these means take the form of imperatives. For example, to show respect for the purposes of academic language, a writer ought "to define key terms" and "to write clearly." To show respect to other writers, an academic writer ought, for example, "to present another writer's views fairly." To show respect for the integrity of the subject, a writer ought, for instance, "to gather all seemingly relevant information" on it; and to show respect for readers, a writer ought "to assume an open-minded reader" ("Con." 799).

Altogether, Stotsky's approach articulated in these two articles identifies 20 writer obligations, 12 of which relate to a writer's necessary respect for her subject matter. Stotsky observes that this list is not comprehensive ("Con." 800). But, needless to say, because these responsibilities apply to all academic writing situations, a writer's obligation to respect historical or temporal aspects of rhetorical context is ignored.

The use of a deontological form of ethical justification is much more readily observed in these articles arguing for composition instructors to teach writing as moral and civic thinking. In conceptualizing these writer obligations as being "fundamental" to responsible academic writing and civic particiation, this approach relies on a conception of acts as self-justifying, that is, intrinsically good or right rather than being good because of the consequences they bring about. Hence, Stotsky is able to state that "Preciseness and clarity are prized qualities of

academic writing," such that failure to define key terms, for example, can prevent writers from recognizing that they haven't been clear, that is, that they've failed to fulfill their obligation to respect the purposes of academic language. In Stotsky's workds, failing to define key terms "can prevent writers from detecting problems with the meaning of material in their own writing or in the writing of others" ("Academic" 137). These principles or responsibilities, therefore, as Stotsky says of the writer's ideas, "should be able to stand on their own merits" ("Academic" 158).

That these principles are obligations based on reason and written in the form of imperatives is most directly evidenced in the specific uses of the terms "obligation" and "responsibility" to refer to the actions of writing teachers, students, scholars, and citizens. Further, the rational bases of these obligations emerges in recurrent linking of "moral" and "logical" forms of reasoning in both essays. In addition, the principles are treated as universal, acontextual norms, i.e., in Stotsky's terms a "general rubric" of both academic and civic writers' responsibilities. These "ethical standards," (Stotsky's term, "Academic" 135) are universally applicable not only across disciplinary boundaries, but also in the sphere of public discourse, in addition to being "equally applicable to all academic writers, male or female" ("Con." 805). These standards thus exist apart from individual writers or teachers, and the form of reasoning used in this ethical approach to composition is one of applying a particular principle to a given situation. The concern is with observing a principle in action, rather than evaluating an action according to its effects. Hence, a writer's failure to fulfill her or his obligation is referred to in the articles as "lapses," that is, a failure to live up to the standard ("Academic" 138; "Con." 802).

Conclusion

In doing this analysis so far, I do not mean to suggest that writing as cultural criticism relies only upon consequentialist forms of ethical reasoning and that writing as moral and civic thinking relies only upon deontological ones. Rather, one can probably find elements of both forms of justification in each theory. We need to examine this issue further because, as I stated

at the beginning of my talk, identifying the forms of ethical reasoning we use in our composition theories will enable us to understand better ways in which we try to justify what it is we think we should be doing in our writing classes and, more important, why this is so. At stake here is, of course, issues of the function and purposes of our work as writing teachers in relation not only to ourselves and our students, but also to the larger contexts of the university and the economic, social, and political conditions in which we and our students live.

Further, understanding the forms of ethical justification our composition theories rely on will enable us to interrogate our theories for their strengths and limitations in terms of what they allow us to do in our classes, particularly in terms of the kinds of writing practices our theories advocate. In general, both consequentialist and deontological forms of ethical reasoning have benefits and problems when put into action. As Pojman points out, consequentialist ethics provides a reasonably clear, single guide for action (e.g., maximize welfare) and it seems to get at the spirit of ethical action, i.e., "promoting human (and possibly animal) flourishing and ameliorating human suffering" (80). However, consequentialist ethics have been open to several criticisms. Pojman states that utilitarianism, for example, has been open to four main criticisms: (1) playing God; (2) allowing agents "no rest"; (3) violating personal integrity; (4) enabling acts that on an intuitive level seem to be unjust (80-86). The strength of deontological forms of ethical reasoning, in contrast, is that it equalizes the obligations of all moral agents (109). However, the main problems are that it doesn't take into account the context of action and moral decisions, and in its emphasis on the authority of rules or duties it can turn moral agents into moral robots (105-107).

We need to examine ways in which our composition theories achieve these positive ends, ways in which they fall into the traps of their ethical reasoning, and ways in which they go beyond these problems. In doing this, we can contribute not only to the development of our own ethics in composition but also to the discussion of ethics in general.

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